Panchayati Raj in Action
A Study of Rajasthan
P K Chaudhuri

Panchayati Raj institutions are more than mere agencies or limbs of the State Government; their purpose is not achieved with carrying out the development programmes and administrative tasks entrusted to them. They are organs of self-government at their respective levels. Mobilising popular enthusiasm and harnessing local manpower and other resources for development are thus their very raison d’etre. The functioning of Panchayati Raj has to be judged by the progress made towards achieving these vital objectives.

To bring about the direct and willing participation of the villagers in development, the planning process has to start from the village. Panchayati Raj institutions were expected to give the lead in this matter, but this they have failed to do so far. The so-called village production plans that we have now are nothing but paper plans prepared by the Village Level Workers in consultation with a few village ciders and the sarpanch of the panchayat. No serious attempt has been made to prepare genuine village plans incorporating targets for each crop and for every family in the village.

Panchayat samitis and village panchayats are prompt to take up and execute programmes for which the Government provides loans, grants or subsidies so as to avoid themselves of this assistance. But programmes which have to be carried out with local resources and initiative lag behind.

PANCHAYATI Raj was inaugurated in Rajasthan on October 27, 1959. Elections to panchayat, samitis and zila parishads were held the same month on the basis of the then existing village panchayats. In 1960 the village panchayats were reconstituted according to the one-village-one-panchayat principle. The State was divided into 7,394 panchayat cycles, each with a population of 1,500 to 2,000. Fresh elections to these reconstituted panchayats were held in December 1960 and elections to panchayat samitis and zila parishads were completed by March 1961. It was without doubt a very bold step to introduce democratic decentralisation throughout the State at one stroke. It was a leap in the dark. But, after four years of working, it can be confidently said that Panchayati Raj has come to stay.

Though decentralisation has not yet succeeded in harnessing popular enthusiasm for development work, the execution and administration of development schemes entrusted to Panchayati Raj have been, by and large, satisfactory. The success of Panchayati Raj has to be judged by the extent to which the objectives set for it have been achieved. These objectives have been set out in the Third Plan as follows:

(i) Increasing agricultural production;
(ii) Development of rural industry;
(iii) Fostering co-operative institutions;
(iv) Full utilisation of local manpower and other resources and the resources, physical and financial, available to Panchayati Raj institutions;
(v) Assisting the economically weaker sections of the village community;
(vi) Progressive dispersal of authority and initiative, with special emphasis on the role of voluntary organisations; and,
(vii) Fostering cohesion and encouraging the spirit of self-help within the community.

Reluctance to Tax
One of the primary objectives of Panchayati Raj is to encourage people's participation in developmental activities. The efforts made by panchayat samitis to raise local resources is a measure of people's participation. Table 1 indicates the tax effort made by panchayat samitis in the last three years. Of the 232 panchayat samitis in the State, only 175 have so far imposed any taxes. Cess on land revenue appears to be the most popular levy nearly 67 per cent of the panchayat samitis have imposed it. It should be pointed out, though, that of the 26 districts in the State, in about ten of the bigger ones, which cover more than half the State, there used to be district boards before the introduction of Panchayati Raj. The district boards used to levy a cess on land revenue at the rate of 6 nP per rupee. When Panchayati Raj was introduced, the district boards were abolished, but Section 70 (4) of the Rajasthan Panchayat Samitis and Zila Parishads Act, 1959 provided that "any taxes that were being levied and collected by an abolished District Board immediately before the date of its abolition shall, if such taxes are permissible under Section 33 of this Act, continue to be levied and collected under the constitution of a Panchayat Samiti for any area of the said District Board, by such Panchayat Samiti unless it decides otherwise by resolution" So the cess on land revenue continued to be levied at the reduced rate of 5 nP per rupee by the successor panchayat samitis.

The cess on land revenue, therefore, cannot be treated as a fresh tax effort by the panchayat samitis, except in those areas where there were no district boards previously. The other taxes, namely, on professions and fairs, education, etc, can be taken as a measure of the effort made by the panchayat samitis to mobilise local resources. Table 1 also compares the estimated annual income from taxes of the panchayat samitis with the actual realisation. It is seen that even in 1962-63 realised collections including collection of arrears were only 50 per cent of estimated annual income. Thus pancha-
Linking Taxes to Benefit

To encourage greater involvement of the population in the process of development it is necessary to overcome people’s resistance to payment of taxes. The hope that the ushering in of Panchayati Raj will reduce this resistance has been belied by experience. The Study Team on Panchayat Finances appointed by the Government of India has suggested the imposition of compulsory taxes to augment the resources of panchayat samitis. But so long as villagers resist payment of taxes, compulsory taxes are no solution of the problem.

Nobody has yet made a proper study of why the villagers are averse to paying taxes. One of the main reasons, it is possible, is that they do not see any direct link between the taxes they pay and the benefits they get. If the resources could be collected in such a manner that the direct relationship between the benefits received and the taxes paid becomes evident to the villagers, their resistance to taxes will be reduced. One way of doing this is that the panchayat samitis should not impose any permanent taxes of a general or all-purpose nature. Instead, every year they should impose levies for specific projects, say, a school building, a village road, an irrigation dam, etc, and the funds so raised should be earmarked for and spent on these projects. Permanent taxes of a general nature may be raised by a body further removed from the people than the panchayat samitis.

Land revenue is one of the most important direct taxes paid by the agriculturist. But he has not the faintest idea as to how land revenue is being spent—whether he gets back even a part through the various schemes and projects executed in the village, and, if so, how much. Table 2 gives the figures of the State’s land revenue collection during the last three years and the panchayat samitis’ budget and expenditure. It will be evident that the budgeted annual income and expenditure of the panchayat samitis correspond very nearly to the land revenue collected. If all the land revenue collected from a panchayat circle is transferred to the village panchayat and all its development programmes are financed with it, the villager will readily perceive the relationship between the land revenue paid by him and the benefit that he receives. Besides, a surcharge on land revenue is long overdue and villagers will accept it more readily if the collections are spent on development schemes in the village.

Planning from Below

While preparing the State’s Third Five Year Plan attempts were made to involve the panchayat samitis in the process. Before the State plans were finalised, proposals for development projects were collected from village panchayats at the samiti headquarters. But this was done without any indication of priorities. The State Government informed the panchayat samitis of the tentative schemewise allocation of funds that will be made available to them during the Plan period. The proposals received from the village panchayats were then sifted, modified and shaped into the block plan and forwarded to the State Government through the zila panchayat. And at the State headquarters these proposals went through further modifications. Thus the process did not succeed to any great extent in incorporating the felt needs of the people in the Plan.

Table 1: Tax Effort by Panchayat Samitis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Panchayat Samitis which imposed taxes</th>
<th>Number of Panchayat Samitis which levied cess on land revenue</th>
<th>Number of Panchayat Samitis which levied education cess</th>
<th>Number of Panchayat Samitis which levied tax on professions</th>
<th>Number of Panchayat Samitis which levied tax on fairs</th>
<th>Estimated annual income of panchayat samitis from taxes (Rs lakhs)</th>
<th>Actual realisation (Rs lakhs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960-61</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>29.74</td>
<td>9.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961-62</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>37.89</td>
<td>15.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962-63</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>41.88</td>
<td>20.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Land Revenue Collection and Panchayat Samitis’ Expenditure (Rs. lakhs)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Land Revenue Collected</th>
<th>Panchayat Samitis’ Budget</th>
<th>Panchayat Samitis’ Expenditure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960-61</td>
<td>715.16</td>
<td>831.31</td>
<td>803.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961-62</td>
<td>847.00</td>
<td>745.51</td>
<td>725.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962-63</td>
<td>875.00</td>
<td>745.43</td>
<td>724.47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To achieve the direct and willing participation of the villagers in plan implementation, the planning process should start from the village. While drawing up the plan each village should be given an indication, as definitely as possible, of the resources that will be made available to it during the plan period and the local community on its part should make a firm commitment to implement the projects formulated on the basis of their felt needs. The State Government’s Evaluation Organisation carried out a random survey to assess public opinion on the formulation of development plans. It revealed that an overwhelming majority of the people want the plan to be prepared at the local level. The results of the survey are given below:
provided. But programmes which are to be carried out with local resources and initiative lag behind. Programmes like production of pure seed by registered seed growers, development and proper use of local manurial resources, use of improved implements, adoption of improved practices, etc., have not evoked sufficient response in the villages. This can be attributed to a very large extent to the failure of the extension services. Extension services were started in the blocks nearly a decade ago, but even now there is hardly any communication between the extension personnel and the villager. Impressive statistical figures are published from time to time by the Government regarding increased irrigation potential, distribution of fertilizers, use of improved implements, etc., but these achievements are seldom reflected in higher productivity on the fields.

The extension services should cater to the individual needs of the farmer, advise him on his problems and suggest solutions for his day-to-day difficulties. Today the approach of the extension services to rural problems is abstract and general. The extension personnel seldom go into the farmer's individual and specific problems. Unless this is done, little communication can be expected to be established between the farmer and the extension personnel. And without such communication being established, our extension methods will never be able to make any impact on the rural scene.

Abstract, General Approach

Under present rules, the panchayat samiti vehicle can be used only when at least three extension officers go on tour together. So for touring the samiti area the extension officers generally form groups of 3 to 6 persons, take the samiti vehicle and go to the villages. They usually stop in a village for a short while, collect a few persons available on the spot or ask the sarpanch or a panch who is readily available to collect some people. Then they deliver harangues on their respective subjects in abstract and general terms. This method of extension has failed to make any impression on the agriculturist.

At times attempts are made to explain away this failure by putting the blame on the conservatism of the Indian farmer and his reluctance to adopt modern practices. It is difficult to subscribe to this view. The Indian farmer is not a fool. He is reputed for his strong commonsense. Take, for instance, the case of bullock carts. In rural India, the bullock cart is the only means of transport on which the farmer depends for moving his crop, manure and fodder and for visits to fairs and markets as well as for making social calls. The bullock carts used to have wooden or iron tyres, but in the last four or five years almost 90 per cent of the carts—bullock, camel or human drawn—in the State have been fitted with pneumatic rubber tyres. No extension officer or Government agency told farmers to adopt this modification in their age-old means of transportation. But they realised the value of this innovation and avidly seized upon it without any external agency urging them to do so.

Convincing the Farmer

What this example underscores is that a farmer has to be first convinced by practical demonstration of the value of any new method or practice before he can be expected to adopt it. The majority of our agriculturists belong to an income group just on or below subsistence level and it is wishful to expect them to indulge in the luxury of experimenting with new ideas on the strength of a few harangues from extension officers, whom they regard as youngmen, full of book-learning but ignorant of actual agricultural practices. It has been observed that whenever an enterprising agriculturist adopts a new agricultural practice and gets better yields from his field as a result, his neighbours adopt it without waiting for anybody to ask them to do so. It has been noted that the introduction of a new crop pattern in any locality by an agriculturist has a quicker and greater impact in the neighbourhood than the introduction of an improved practice of cultivation for the existing crop pattern in force in the area.

Demonstrations given in State-owned farms do not convince the farmer. The reason for this is obvious. The Government-managed farms are usually spoon-fed. Money and materials are spent on them freely. Rarely are any of these farms economically even self-supporting, not to talk of profitable. Naturally, therefore, demonstrations given in the State farms do not carry conviction with the agriculturist.

Gaps In Administrative Procedure

The extension personnel are generally ill-equipped for the job they are entrusted with. Lack of practical field experience and adequate knowledge of local problems are their principal handicaps. Besides, the extension staff function under a dual control. The extension officers for agriculture, animal husbandry, co-operation, etc., are on deputation with the panchayat samiti. The Vikas Adhikari (Block Development Officer) has administrative control over them. Simultaneously they are under the technical control of the officers of their respective parent departments who are supposed to supervise and guide them in their technical work. Moreover, even though they are under the administrative control of the Vikas Adhikari, he cannot take any disciplinary action against them. Since they are on deputation with the panchayat samiti, all disciplinary action against them is initiated and taken by officers belonging to the parent department. This type of dual control encourages indiscipline among the extension staff and also contributes to their ineffective functioning.

Another important cause of indiscipline is the lack of clear demarcation of the spheres of action of the Pradhan (president of the panchayat samiti) and the Vikas Adhikari. At times conflicting instructions are issued to the extension staff by the Pradhan and the Vikas Adhikari. In case of friction between the two, the extension personnel are found to align themselves, some with the Pradhan and others with the Vikas Adhikari. This creates an impossible situation for the administration of the panchayat samiti.

District level extension officers are superimposed on the departmental cadre and function under the guidance and control of their departmental officers either at the regional level or at the headquarters. The district level officers, it has been noticed, evince less interest in their
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work In the field since the Introduction of Panchayati Raj than they used to do before. They appear to feel that with the introduction of Panchayati Raj the onus of execution of projects has passed on to the popular representatives and Panchayati Raj institutions. The Government is conscious of this and various steps have been taken and instructions issued from time to time to ensure that the district officers take interest in their work, but till now these efforts have not produced results. One suggestion that has been made is that the services of these officers may be transferred to the zila parishad and these officers placed under the administrative control of the zila parishad.

Village Production Plans

In the words of the Grow More Food Committee "no plan can have any chance of success unless the millions of small farmers in the country accept its objectives, share in its making, regard it as their own and are prepared to make the sacrifices necessary for implementing it." This can happen only when the extension agencies can assist every farmer with his production programme, otherwise, to quote Shri V T Krishnamachari, "these agencies will cease to command confidence."

The Third Plan outlay on agriculture is nearly double that provided in the Second Plan. During the First Plan agricultural production increased by 17 per cent and during the Second Plan by 16 per cent. It is proposed to increase agricultural production during the Third Plan by about 30 per cent and the yield per acre of foodgrains by about 16 per cent. This is a tremendous task. The only way these ambitious targets can be achieved is by involving all the cultivators, small and big, in the country. This can be done only by formulating effective village production plans. Panchayati Raj institutions were expected to give the lead in this matter but this they have failed to do so far. The so-called village production plans that we have today are nothing but paper plans casually prepared by the Village Level Workers in consultation with a couple of village elders and the sarpanch of the village panchayat. No serious attempt has yet been made to prepare an authentic village production plan incorporating production targets for each crop and for every family in the village.

The village production plans, according to the Third Five Year Plan, should include two main groups of programmes:

(a) Programmes such as supply of credit, fertilisers and improved seeds, plant protection, minor irrigation, etc. for which a measure of assistance has to come from outside the village; and

(b) Programmes such as digging field channels for utilising irrigation from large projects, maintenance of bunds and field channels, digging and maintenance of village tanks, development and utilisation of local manurial resources, etc. which call for effort on the part of the village community or the beneficiaries.

In practice, the village production plans that are prepared at present do not take into consideration the productive capacities of the individual families in the village but are based purely on group f a) type programmes and are formulated on the basis of estimates or indications of the quantum of outside assistance expected to be made available during the agricultural season. No attempts have so far been made to incorporate in the village production plan group (b) type programmes which call for effort on the part of the village community or the beneficiaries. So the Planning Commission's directive "to give effect, in the field of extension, to the idea of working out village production plans so as to draw all the cultivators into the common effort, and at the same time, to make available to individual farmers in an efficient and organised manner the credit supplies, and other assistance needed" still remains on paper. As long as village production plans are not prepared on the basis of family units and in consultation with them, they will fail to involve the farmers.

Evils of Indirect Election

The Pradhan of a panchayat samiti is elected by the sarpanches of village panchayats in the jurisdiction of the samiti and the co-opted members of the samiti. In Rajasthan there are 7,394 village panchayats and 272 panchayat samitis. In 1960-61, 25 per cent of the elections of panches and sarpanches were unanimous; of sarpanches, 38.8 percent were elected unanimously. But unanimous elections of panchayat samiti pradhans were
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Of the 232 panchayat samitis in the State no less than 60 have co-opted members as their pradhans. Of the co-opted persons who are pradhans, 80.5 per cent have been co-opted because of their experience in administration. Similarly 33.3 of the chairmen of the standing committees on production are co-opted members.

An enquiry by the State Government’s evaluation organisation into the nature of participation of co-opted members in samiti meetings is not very encouraging. Only about 10.2 per cent of the co-opted members participated actively in discussions at samiti meetings, while nearly 70 per cent of them had never participated at all in any discussion. Among co-opted members, of course, the most active are those who have been co-opted for their so-called experience in administration or social work. Co-opted members representing women, scheduled castes and tribes are the least active.

Politics of Standing Committees

Under Section 20(1) of the Act every panchayat samiti is required to constitute standing committees for each of the following group of subjects:
- Production programmes, including agriculture and other allied subjects;
- Social services, including education, sanitation, communication and allied subjects; and
- Finance, taxation and administration.

Panchayat samitis usually meet once every quarter. It is the standing committees which function throughout the year. As provided in the Act, the samiti delegates its powers and functions to the standing committee by a resolution and the decisions of the standing committee have the same legal force as those of the samiti unless it is revoked by the samiti within a month of the date on which it is taken.

The standing committee members are elected by simple majority and so normally the minority group in the samiti goes unrepresented on these committees which are monopolised by the majority group consisting of the supporters of the pradhan. The decisions taken by the standing committees are not always above reproach: very often they are influenced by factional and group considerations.

Members of panchayat samitis are generally more interested in transfers, postings and appointments of samiti staff than in developmental activities. This is what the State Evaluation Organisation has to say about the duration of meetings of the various standing committees: “On an average the meetings of the standing committees on Administration and Finance were the longest while those of the standing committees on Production were the shortest. It is interesting to note that a fairly large number of meetings of the standing committees lasted for only 15 minutes. Hardly any business could have been transacted in such meetings and they were just called to complete the formality of doing so.”

Some statistics on the duration of the meetings of standing committees is given below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standing Committee</th>
<th>Average (in hours and minutes)</th>
<th>Longest</th>
<th>Shortest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Production</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Services</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration and Finance</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>6.45</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Role of Officials

After the introduction of Panchayati Raj, almost all appointments to the posts of Vikas Adhikaris have been made from the cadre of the State Administrative Services. The Vikas Adhikari is the chief executive officer of the panchayat samiti. But in practice he has no control over the samiti staff. Under Section 89 (2) of the Act he can punish only class IV staff; against the rest of the staff he can only record censures. But an appeal against such censure can be made to the standing committee of the samiti. Punishment of all other
This has created an anomalous position. The Vikas Adhikari is responsible for ensuring that plans and programmes approved by the appropriate authority are executed efficiently and for exercising supervision and control over the acts of all officers and servants of the panchayat samiti and the staff working in institutions and schemes transferred by the State Government to the panchayat samiti in matters of executive administration. Yet he has been given no disciplinary control over the staff. As a result, the panchayat samiti gets paralysed when relations between the pradhan and the vikas adhikari are not cordial and when the pradhan is the chairman of the standing committee on administration which exercise disciplinary control over the samiti staff.

There is evidence of growing deterioration in the relations between officials and non-officials in the panchayat samitis. Instances of friction between the pradhan and the vikas adhikari are on the increase. Whenever the pradhan happens to be educated or assertive, conflicts with the vikas adhikari are frequent. A clear demarcation of the spheres of action and powers and functions of the two is urgently called for.

A panchayat samiti has a representative of the co-operative societies in the area as one of its co-opted members and the co-operative extension officer is placed under the administrative control of the vikas adhikari. In spite of this there is lack of coordination between the two. At the village panchayat level the situation is much worse. At times co-operatives and panchayats appear to work at cross purposes. Cooperative societies very often find place for persons losing panchayat elections. These persons then try to use the cooperative movement to regain political power. This is a reason why the cooperative movement is dominated by politicians.

Panchayats Lose Importance

The village panchayat is the cornerstone of Panchayati Raj. But in fact village panchayats in the State have grown weaker than before the inauguration of Panchayati Raj. Some of the factors responsible for this are shortage of finance, increase in factionalism, and emergence of the sarpanch as a powerful personality on account of his membership of the panchayat samiti.

With the introduction of Panchayati Raj village panchayats were constituted on the one-village-one-panchayat basis. Two consequences followed from this. First, with the reduction in size, the income of the village panchayats suffered proportionate decrease, while their overhead expenditure remained the same. Second, on account of the compact and smaller size of the panchayats contest for the offices became wider, keener and closer and gave rise to factionalism on a wide scale. The consequence of all this has been that the village panchayat as an institution actually suffered a setback after the introduction of the Panchayati Raj.

The Rajasthan Panchayat (Amendment) Act 1960 made provision for gram sabhas. It is provided that "Every panchayat shall convene in such manner and at such times and intervals as may be prescribed, a meeting of all adult residents of the panchayat circle - at such meetings the programme and works undertaken by the panchayat and their progress shall be explained and the views of the residents thereon shall be reported to the panchayat at its next meeting".

Though it has been decided to hold the meetings every six months, the Institution of the gram sabha has yet to find its place in the Panchayati Raj system. The participants in these meetings are mostly passive, except when matters pertaining to the revenue or forest departments come under discussion. In such discussion they air their grievances without any inhibition.

Weaker Sections Have Not Benefitted

Panchayati Raj has not brought relief to the weaker section of the community. There has been no perceptible increase in the flow of benefits of development to the economically and socially weaker sections of the village community. According to the 1961 Census, the State has a population of 21 millions, of which scheduled castes constitute about 3 million and scheduled tribes about 2.1 millions. Yet there is not a single scheduled caste pradhan in the whole State. Out of a total of 7,394 sarpanches, the number of scheduled caste sarpanches could be counted on one's fingers. And only in predominantly tribal areas do we find a few sarpanches and pradhans belonging to the scheduled tribes. Rural leadership is still in the hands of the relatively well-to-do classes in the village which control all vantage positions in Panchayati Raj.

Another reason why the benefits of development in the rural areas have not percolated through to the weaker sections is that to take advantage of programmes like agricultural loans, subsidies, etc. one must possess land and immovable property to offer as sureties. If the weaker sections of the rural community are to take advantage of these development programmes, present rules in this respect will have to be changed.

Panchayat Training Centres

SOME 66 Panchayati Raj Training Centres are now functioning in the country, providing training facilities to Sarpanches, Up-Sarpanches and Panaches. Of this, 25 are located in Uttar Pradesh, 10 each in Maharashtra and Rajasthan, 3 in Andhra Pradesh, 2 in Assam and one centre each in Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, Manipur and Tripura. Three training centres are being set up in Gujarat.

The original target was to have about one hundred training centres by March, 1963, and to have another 50 in 1963-64. Because of the slow progress, it has now been decided not to have additional centres till the capacity of the existing centres is fully utilised.

The Central Institute of Panchayati Raj with cent percent financial assistance from the Ministry is in charge of training principals and instructors of the Panchayati Raj Training Centres. So far, some 160 teachers have been trained at this Institute.

To ensure the sound working of Panchayati Raj Training Centres, it has been suggested that committees, representing officials and non-officials, should be set up at the State level to look after them. The committees, besides periodically reviewing the work of the Panchayati Raj Training Centres, will also visit the centres and give them on-the-spot guidance.